

GRAPHIC NOVELS: LEADING THE WAY TO TEEN LITERACY AND LEADERSHIP

by Maryann Mori



Although people of varied ages read graphic novels, these books seem to have a special appeal to teens. A 2003 *Publisher's Weekly* article gave credit to teenagers for causing the “phenomenal” sales growth of Japanese or *manga* graphic novels (Reid, p. 28). With young adults (persons ages 12-18) representing “almost one quarter of the users of public libraries” (Jones, 2002, p.3) and comprising 100% of the student population at middle schools and high schools, public and school librarians will do well not only to include graphic novels in their Young Adult collections, but also to gain a better understanding of these books and the benefits offered by them.

The term *graphic novel* is said to have dated back to the 1940s (Sabin, 1996). However, most sources credit Will Eisner for popularizing the term in 1978 with the publication of his book *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (Weiner, 2003). Eisner featured the phrase “A Graphic Novel” on the front cover of his book. The noticeable location of the phrase was a marketing ploy, intended to broaden the audience of comic books by appealing to more adult consumers and associating the books with novels rather than just comics (Weiner, 2003). Graphic novels differ from comic strips and the traditional comic books of earlier decades. One author describes graphic novels as “lengthy comics in book form with a thematic unity” (Sabin, 1996, p.165). Another writer says they are “a single story or a set of interrelated stories that are told in a sequential art form” and are “more akin to a long short story or novella” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 52).

COMICS VERSUS MANGA

Within the genre of graphic novels, two main formats of books exist: comics and manga. Comics are often associated with traditional superheroes, such as the characters Batman and Spiderman. The so-called Golden Age of comics started around 1938 with the introduction of Superman, lasted until approximately 1955, and birthed many superheroes, including Wonder Woman and the all-American comic high school student, Archie (Krashen, 1993). More recently, comics

have gone beyond the superhero story, although such story lines are still popular. Librarian Anne Behler (2006) explains comics’ transformation like this: “[D]uring the 1970s and ‘80s, comics began to take on a more literary tone; many publishers moved away from the serial publication of short comic books to focus on more complex book-length titles, and as a result, comic readership expanded from children to young adults and adults” (p. 17).

Comic books today can be found on a variety of topics including satire, historical events, and adaptations of classic literature (Behler, 2006). Non-traditional comics, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (first published in 1973), have helped popularize this new type of comic book. When *Maus*, a Holocaust survivor’s story, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, it not only became the first comic book ever to win the award, but it also proved that comic books are capable of being more than funny cartoons and, as one writer says, allowed these books “to take their rightful seat at the table of quality literature of our time” (Thompson, 2007, p. 29).

Manga, on the other hand, are comics that originate in Japan, although non-Japanese authors and publishers often imitate the general style. Not to be confused with anime (Japanese cartoon films), “manga” is the word used to describe the print version of Japanese cartoons. Manga usually have a distinctive artistic style which includes exaggerated eyes and a sweeping or pointed hair style. The books are printed and read from right to left in the style of the Japanese language. Keeping with that style, Japanese word characters (*kanji*) are often included even when the books are English translations. The history of manga goes back as far as the 12th century, but its present form developed in the 1950s largely due to Tezuka Osamu’s work (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003). Manga usually begin in serial format, appearing first in weekly, biweekly, or monthly periodicals (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003). As the story becomes longer, it is published in book format.

CRITICISMS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Like the comic books of the 1950s, today’s graphic novels are often the subject of criticism. Some teachers

claim the books “are too easy to read” (Thompson, 2007, p. 29). Critics of graphic novels may regard the books as “dumbed-down” since illustrations are included with the text (Shea, 2006). The books are often mistakenly labeled as too juvenile for older readers. One native Japanese man, who grew up reading manga and still reads it today as a well-educated adult said, “My father told me I would be stupid if I read manga and tried to make me stop reading it” (A. Mori, personal communication, August 13, 2006). Unlike these critics, a Cornell University sociologist, Donald P. Hayes, believes graphic novels have “challenging” vocabulary (“Spark reading,” 2000). Hayes was quoted in a 2000 *Curriculum Review* as saying, “I think you’re getting pretty meaty stuff in comic books” (“Spark reading,” 2000).

In *The Power of Reading*, author Stephen Krashen (1993) dispels the assumptions that comic books are harmful. On the contrary, Krashen (1993) cites references showing “there is considerable evidence that comic books can and do lead to more “serious’ reading” (p. 50). Dan Tandarich, a thirty-something educator, curriculum author, and advocate of graphic novels says he started reading comics at the age of four, but in his teen years he “moved onto sci-fi novels, mythology, and the classics” (Shea, 2006, p. 16-17). Tandarich believes that comic books “can spark that imagination and create the foundation for a love of reading” (2006, p. 16-17).

Adults may sometimes have difficulty accepting the content of graphic novels—content they feel is too *graphic* for children or teens. Topics in graphic novels often include death, violence, sex, and occasional nudity. A public library in Marshall, Missouri, recently removed some copies of graphic novels after patrons “objected to the books’ nudity and sexual content” (Hart, 2006, p. 4). The reaction to content can often be a misunderstanding of cultural differences. For example, because of their Japanese origin, many manga reflect the Japanese attitudes and standards about nudity and sexuality, which are often different from those standards of many Americans. Other times the reaction is due to some adults’ failure to know the broad age span for which graphic novels are written. Due to the books’ cartoon illustrations, some adults mistakenly believe graphic novels are created only for young children, without realizing the books exist for all ages, including adults.

TEEN APPEAL

Despite criticisms, there is no denying that graphic novels have a large teen following. A librarian at the Marshall, Missouri, library restated that fact in a 2006 *Kansas City Star* interview and added that the books also appeal to “teens who do not typically read” (Hart, 2006, p. 4). The books’ emphasis on visual images

“cater” to the visual society in which today’s teens live (Behler, 2006, p. 17). Based upon *Reaching Reluctant Young Adult Readers* by Edward T. Sullivan (2002), some reasons graphic novels appeal to teens include the books’

- quick and visual format that is similar to television, the Internet, and video games
- nonlinear narrative format like the hypertext on a computer screen
- development of characters through dialogue, which gives a more realistic slant to
- story
- edgier themes
- paperback format
- series format (p. 54).

Allen and Ingulsrud’s 2003 findings indicate that students who like manga do so for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the content is often misunderstood and criticized by adults, and reading manga is therefore a way for teens to resist adult authority. Another finding indicates that readers of manga are eager to learn more about another culture and language, namely, Japanese (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003).

CLASSROOM USE

Realizing graphic novels’ appeal to teens, some educators are successfully using graphic novels in the classroom. In a recent article, Nancy Schneider (2007) describes how “comic books were both my bridge for improving [a struggling reader’s] reading ability and a way to build trust with a frustrated student” (p. 57). She observes that comic books “offer pictures for context, introduce plot and sequencing, expand vocabulary and may help provide an alternate path into classroom discussions of higher level text” (p. 57). Schneider used graphic novels not only to help a reluctant reader become a stronger reader, but also to get that reader excited about reading. Schneider quotes author Marilyn Reynolds’ reasoning: “Just getting reluctant adolescents to read anything can be a boon to their discovery of the joy of reading” (p. 57). Gretchen E. Schwartz, a university professor, agrees. Schwartz (2002) believes graphic novels can be used as a tool to “introduce students to literature they might never otherwise encounter” (p. 262). She references a 1998 study that suggests “more complex cognitive skills” than those required for reading traditional text-only books may be required in order to read graphic novels (p. 263).

Part of Allen and Ingulsrud’s (2003) study demonstrates the ways teachers are using manga in the classroom. According to the study, manga readers are “engaged readers” since they must develop ways to follow the framed format and combination of illustrations with various text in a way that causes the readers

to “become adept at deciphering meaning in different modes” (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003, p. 680). Manga can be used “to develop students’ awareness and understanding of multiple literacies” and to teach reading strategies, “such as word recognition and problem solving” (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003, p. 680). Using manga to introduce other stories and types of literature is another way teachers have successfully used manga in the classroom (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003). Studies further indicate that manga readers learn about Japanese language and, as one research participant said, “many worldviews” (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003, p. 677).

LIBRARY USE

Like Allen and Ingulsrud, many youth services librarians are discovering that readers of manga have a keen interest in learning more about Japanese culture. Consequently, these librarians are developing manga clubs for their teen populations. At the Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library (EVPL) in Indiana, a group of teens who call themselves “Otaku Anonymous” meet at the library twice a month to participate in anime and manga-related activities. (*Otaku* or “maniac” is the preferred description of die-hard anime/manga fans who often appreciate other elements of Japanese culture.) EVPL’s *otaku* programs regularly attract 40 to 50 teens, with an overwhelming majority of the participants being boys, the so-called “hard to reach” gender.

The benefits of these types of clubs are hard to ignore; teens are heading to the library in large numbers, regarding the library as *their* place, and creating an environment of enthusiasm for the library in general and manga in particular. As an added and highly valued benefit, circulation statistics often increase when these teens all arrive at the library on the same day and check out stacks of graphic novels. Teens who participate in these programs may also be more likely to visit the

library at other times during the week, and they have a better opportunity to develop a good working relationship with the Teen Services Librarian.

The Harrison Branch of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (PLCH) in Ohio has had similar success with anime clubs. This library’s club includes activities with manga and electronic gaming. According to a recent article by PLCH librarians, the library’s anime club offers teens “a feeling of ownership” at the library (Brehm-Heeger, Conway, & Vale, 2007, p. 14). This library also attracts large number of teen participants in its club, and the librarians note that “half of them are guys” (Brehm-Heeger, et al, 2007, p. 14).

Clubs such as “Otaku Anonymous” verify that manga readers are developing their knowledge and appreciation of another culture by learning the language, customs, fashions, and foods of Japan. At EVPL’s club, teens have enthusiastically participated in Japanese culture nights (complete with Japanese clothing, food, and art), manga drawing lessons, and programs about Japanese pop music (J-pop) and anime. Additionally, these teens have taken an active leadership role in the library by actually planning, preparing and presenting the programs at each meeting. Older students are mentoring younger ones in the ways of manga, and students are proving to be a valuable source of input for developing library collections of manga, anime, and related periodicals.

SHOWING RESPECT

While not all teens will choose to read graphic novels, it is important that librarians respect the reading choices of those students who do choose this genre as their preferred subject matter. Teen librarian guru Patrick Jones (2002) makes the following observation:



Two teens, one American and one Japanese, display the friendship they’ve developed from sharing an interest in manga.



Teens taste yakisoba (Japanese noodle dish) at culture night. Students are served food by Akira Mori, author’s husband. Author is standing behind the students; she is wearing yukata (robe).

To respect the unique needs of young adults means to understand those needs, to accept them, to accommodate them, and to provide services which help to meet those needs. To respect those needs means that collections are responsive and reflect the diverse interests of young adults [...]. To respect the unique needs of young adults is to value what they value. (pp. 17-18).

Many teens are choosing to read graphic novels so educators are developing ways to use these novels in the classroom. Since programs such as anime/manga clubs are creating leaders out of teens, librarians will do well not only to include graphic novels in their collections but should also pick up a graphic novel and read it with new understanding and respect.

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